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ABSTRACT

This study examined, from a student perspective, outcomes of early student field experiences in selected college sophomore level courses in a teacher preparation program. The study, based on a survey of 266 students, examined the influence of the experiences on students' knowledge and skills. Students' knowledge responses are analyzed within the categories of: (1) professional knowledge (general teaching, discipline, teachers, students, and evaluation); (2) content knowledge; (3) context (level, city/urban, general environment, special education sites, and open schools/private); and (4) self-knowledge. Students' responses concerning the identification of skills they developed are analyzed in terms of professional skills associated with classroom instruction, content skills related to teaching within a particular content area, context skills related to specific sites, and self-skills relating to personal development. Data support the importance of field experience as a vehicle for knowledge acquisition. (JDD)

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A Report of Student Experiences in Pre-Student Teaching Field Experience

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Introduction

Current studies of field and clinical experience in teacher preparation programs have shown that field experience is important to the professional development of preservice teachers. It is assumed that the experiences students have in schools enhance and give practical meaning to the more theoretical in-class presentations in teacher education courses. It is also assumed that diverse placements across economic settings, grade levels, and urban-rural settings provide additional value to these experiences. Earlier studies (Ishler and Kay, 1981, Southhall and Dumas, 1981, and Heath, 1984) concluded that students engage in a variety of activities during field components of courses. A study of teacher educators and associated programs in undergraduate teacher education programs showed that knowledge acquisition goals were most frequently named for courses at the sophomore level; however, skills were more often developed at junior and senior levels (Heath, 1984). The majority of findings from these studies were based on responses from faculty and program coordinators and from course and/or program goals. Data were analyzed according to knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values. In contrast, the present study was designed to examine student responses to an open-ended questionnaire after the assigned experiences were completed in each of two courses. Data were analyzed according to selected categories within the broad areas, knowledge and skills. The purpose was to determine what had been learned in field experiences from a student's perspective. It was hoped a comparison of student responses with studies from a program or course perspective might contribute new insights into the nature of student learning in field experiences. Specifically, this study focuses on the following questions:

1. What knowledge is acquired during early field experiences?
2. What skills do students perceive as being developed during field experience?
3. What do students learn about a variety of environment(s)/settings because of a placement in these?

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine outcomes of early student field experiences in selected college sophomore level courses in a teacher preparation program from a student perspective. The study focused primarily on student responses to an exit questionnaire and on the influence of these experiences on knowledge, skills and the context of teaching and schools.

Participants. The participants in the study were students enrolled in each of two selected sophomore level courses in a teacher preparation program in elementary education at a regional campus of The Ohio State University over a five year period. These courses were sequential in the education program. The sample consisted of 266 students in fourteen classes. The distribution was seven sections of the first course with 134 students and seven sections of the second course with 132 students. There were a total of 1952 responses divided fairly evenly across the two courses but not evenly between all students.

The criteria for selection of participants was admission to the program in elementary education, registration in one of these two courses, and completion of the field component of the respective course. The general format of each course was six hours recitation and two hours field experience each week in a K-12 setting. The material in the two courses focused

on educational psychology and included such topics as mainstreaming, introductory education, multicultural experiences, discipline, and planning. The field component of each course was for two hours one day a week for eight weeks with assignments related to the material and discussion in the recitations. However, the specific instructional field assignments were planned according to the specific nature of requirements of each site. For example, students might work with a small group or they might develop and teach a lesson to a whole class. Students were usually paired with one other student at each site. A packet of field experience materials was provided to each student and cooperating teacher and outlined expectations and requirements. During each of the two field experiences each student was expected to: 1) teach at least one lesson in the content area being taught at that time, 2) interact as appropriate in the classroom (i.e. prepare a bulletin board, assist students who need help, provide assistance to the teacher, etc.), and 3) complete observations to gather data of assignments in class (i.e. sociograms, case studies, paper on discipline, etc.). The primary criteria for student placement was to give each student experiences in diverse settings. During the two courses, students were placed in sites that allowed experience with both primary and intermediate or middle school students, suburban and urban settings, and, in some cases, special education classrooms.

Data Collection and Analysis. Following the field component of each course section, each student was asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire to explain what they had learned in each of three categories; knowledge, skills, and other things about their specific site including their interaction with the environment and the people within it. All students in each of the course sections responded with a total of 266 students and 1952 responses. The

framework for sorting and analyzing the data included a three-tiered classification. Data were initially categorized according to knowledge and skills on the basis of key words in the student responses and the context in which the statement was made (e.g. discipline, special education). In the second tier, data in each of these areas were reclassified into professional, content, context, and self. (Self was added after an inspection of the data showed that these items were discrete and did not meet the criteria of other categories.) The classification scheme was used across the two areas of knowledge and skills (e.g. professional knowledge, skill knowledge, content knowledge, content skill). This is consistent in style with the framework used by Shulman (1986, 1987; Shulman and Grossman, 1988) in which knowledge was organized into eight domains. The third tier of the framework included reclassification of the data further according to additional criteria as indicated in Tables 2 and 3.

Once the data were entered into the framework, each category was examined for trends and patterns within and across classification tiers and the major areas. Frequencies were calculated and are reported in tables. Exemplar student responses were selected for most of the cells of the framework and are reported to illustrate both the use of the criteria in the classification of responses and the richness of student responses overall. Finally, the overall findings are compared to the conclusions from previous studies based on course goals (e.g. do knowledge outcomes remain among the most important).

Results and Discussion

As earlier stated there were 266 students who responded to the questionnaire. There were 1952 student statements. The findings presented below are organized into two major

sections according to the major categories and subcategories within each of these. This framework and distribution of student responses is shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3. The major categories (first tier) include: (a) knowledge (facts or concepts about teaching and learning in schools, knowledge of educational environments, and self knowledge) and (b) skills (action by student in professional activity, teaching in a particular content, acting in context, and professional development).

Knowledge

Of the 1952 student responses, 75% were about knowledge distributed across subcategories as shown in Table 1.

Professional Knowledge: Knowledge statements within each of the four subcategories are reported in Table 2. Professional knowledge which includes student statements about teaching and learning including evaluation and discipline, students and teachers represents 667 statements or 46% of the statements within knowledge. Examples of the largest number (305) of comments within professional knowledge category, general teaching include: "Subject matter is important and you must be flexible. Drop or change what is not working." and "The job entails more time and involves more stress than I originally thought it did and...you have many people to answer to."

Discipline statements (155) were nearly one fourth of all statements associated with professional knowledge. Examples of discipline statements are: "Discipline procedures vary from person to person, school to school, and for each student. There are various ways to discipline...and a teacher must be aware of each and every option and know how to successfully apply them. Laws, rules, and knowledge of management skills is very important

to teaching."

One hundred and nine statements were about teachers. Comments included a variety of statements; however, some are both positive and negative. For example, "I came to appreciate teachers." "There really are positive teachers." "Mrs. X showed much creativity in the classroom." "I developed a better understanding of how biased teachers can affect student attitudes toward school."

Professional knowledge about pupils was indicated by 83 student statements. This subcategory includes statements about children's behavior and characteristics. Examples of these observations include: "Some students are hard to like." "Children act differently, even in the same grade." "Each age child is interesting in their own way."

There were 15 statements about assessment and evaluation. One example is "(I learned about) grading and evaluating practices."

Content Knowledge: Content knowledge was reported in 41 student statements. The statements about specific content observed in school sites represents 3% of the data within knowledge. Examples of statements include: "Reading can be a challenge for some students, but it still can be made fun," I will do math measurements outside," "I learned about Ohio history," "I am more conscious of teaching content."

Context Knowledge: Context statements or field site data represent 446 (32%) within knowledge. Context statements were those that were associated with field site placements. The site variables include general statements about school environments, age level of students observed, location of site (urban or suburban), type of school (private or open), and population of students served (special education).

Student statements about the grade level of the site placement represent 148 of the knowledge statements. Students commented about the characteristics of pupils in particular age groups. For example, "I learned that there is a huge difference when switching from first grade, then to eighth grade, and then to fourth grade. Each age child is interesting in his/her own way. I learned not to judge a student's grades/abilities by his/her personality."

Statements about teaching pupils in different age groups were made. For example one observer wrote: "This age group, seventh grade, has trouble taking short essay tests. If the question has more than one part to it, many students fail to answer all the parts." Another student responded, "...first graders observe more than I realized. Also first graders do not seem to like change in their classroom. More specifically, they get confused and excited when something new is introduced."

Student comments (101) from urban site placement centers on new knowledge about teaching and learning in the schools. Comments specifically about general knowledge of city schools highlight information acquired. For example, "I have acquired a great deal of knowledge regarding a low socio-economic (school) environment (and) the problems of health, learning disability, physical disorders, as well as home environments. All of this filters back to the school settings." "The inner city school is different than the suburban or rural school. Inner city schools seem to have more of a variety of students with different backgrounds."

Statements about urban pupils were a part of professional knowledge associated with cultural awareness observed in different sites. One student wrote, "Something else that I learned had to do with the Black children in the class. Whenever a couple of them colored

the faces of people, they always colored them black or brown. This was something I never thought about before. I believe that this will help me to be little more sensitive to the fact that we all, including children, see some things in very different ways." Another stated, "I learned that inner city kids are much different than country school children. They have different backgrounds, family lifestyles, and values. You can't look down on them for this, but you do have to change your teaching style. You have to be firm yet understanding." One more wrote, "My attitudes about inner city schools have changed. I have learned that children in the inner city schools are just like children other places. They need love, patience, and understanding just as anyone else."

Student knowledge statements (122) about field experience sites in general included those student responses relating to characteristics of school environments. Some examples include: "Not all students are the same. Not all schools are the same. Not all teachers approach teaching in the same manner." "I learned more about the attitudes of teachers and students."

Special education classrooms were sites for some students. The course goal was to place students in these sites in order to enhance a student's knowledge and understanding of pupils with special needs in a regular classroom. Professional knowledge statements (78) indicated information about environments serving children with special needs. For example, "(I) learned more about the developmentally handicapped classroom. I saw a different range of kids (in terms of) IQ level and abilities. I saw that a developmentally handicapped classroom seems to be more loving and close knit." "(I learned) the meaning and use of an IEP."

Only one class was placed in either an open or parochial school, consequently the number of responses (12) within this category are limited. For example, "I was able to experience a Catholic school. I have never been in a private school. It seems a little more structured than public (school)."

Knowledge of Self: Knowledge statements associated with self knowledge included those statements that are individual reactions to and reflections about field observations and participation. There were 289 statements by students about themselves. Some statements are about personal characteristics. For example: "I realize I'll lose energy, not enthusiasm." "I am good at learning kid's names." "I wanted kids to like me, now I have to be firm and develop respect." "Students feel comfortable with me." Others are associated with career decisions at a particular grade level. Examples from the data included: "I gained the knowledge that the upper elementary grades are not really that different from the lower elementary grades. I felt comfortable in each atmosphere. I saw that the attitudes of the students toward each other changed by seventh grade because the students have developed their own friendship rings or groups." "My attitude toward upper elementary (sixth grade) changed greatly. At first, I was hesitant going into the sixth grade thinking that I would not want to teach there. However, I have discovered, and I am pleased, that I would like to teach the upper levels."

Some students shared their exploration of career options and individual perceptions of pupils after special education placements. One student stated, "At first I was reluctant to go into a developmentally handicapped class because of the stories I had heard. Now, I feel that I would like to teach a special education class because for me it was really rewarding. The

students, not all, were very eager to learn. Some came from bad homes, but they needed guidance and they seemed to beg for it. My heart went out to some of these kids because they would try so hard and if they couldn't get it, they would become very frustrated. My attitudes have certainly changed."

Student placement in urban schools indicated student reactions to teaching and learning in a city site. For example, "This experience was nothing like I expected. My view (of) lower socio-economic (schools) was quite different to what I expected. (It was) better than what I thought. Our room had such a relaxed atmosphere and (a) loud voice from my teacher was non-existent."

At the same time, students consider career choices as they share personal reactions to children and environments they have not previously considered. For instance, "I always thought that I wanted to teach in a rural setting. Now, I find inner city teaching very challenging and feel that I would benefit more by teaching there and possibly changing the lives...of my students."

Student statements (16) in an open or private school include reactions to new or different information within the sites visited. Career choices for teaching in a school with an unfamiliar organization is also shown. "I realize that I would not enjoy teaching in an open classroom. The noise level would be too distracting for me." "I truly would not mind teaching in an open classroom. The way both teachers cooperated to give the students interesting and fun lessons was great. It would be interesting to cooperatively teach only if both teachers could tolerate each other."

In summary, knowledge statements occur within professional knowledge most

frequently, followed by context knowledge, personal development, and content knowledge respectively.

Skills

Student responses to identification of skills developed during field experience represented 25% of the total responses. These responses have been placed in categories including professional skills, associated with classroom instruction; content skills, related to teaching within a particular content area; context skills, related to specific sites; and self skills, statements about personal development.

Professional Skills. Student statements (185) reflect skill development while teaching one or two lessons during the field placements. Student statements (106) also identified planning as a skill. Sometimes the delivery of instruction involved factors in a real classroom that they had not previously anticipated. Two students stated, "I had to learn how to explain things more thoroughly to get at the right answers." "I learned different ways to keep the child's attention when they seem to get nervous or are not listening."

Student statements also indicated that the ability to communicate (58) and observe (56) within classrooms was developed. Examples of communication statements are: "I have better developed the skill of interviewing or getting to know a student while still maintaining a professional level." "My skill to communicate with students has improved greatly. I have never been faced with a confrontation with a student and this quarter there was a girl that was giving me a difficult time and I had to ask her out into the hall. It turned out just fine and we were able to settle things. I didn't know how I would react but I proved successful."

Some statements (34) were about learning to use media in the field. Again, student

comments included: "I learned how to work the copy machine." "I learned how to use a scantron to grade tests."

Student statements (22) about development of discipline strategies were included in the data. For example, "I have developed different techniques for discipline, (not just harsh punishment)." "(I learned) how to work around (make allowances for) habitual disciplinary problems." "I learned how to discipline students. I never had to practice it, but I watched a few times."

Content Skills. Content skills were identified in 18 student statements. Responses dealing with particular subject matter included such items as learning how to present concepts or skills in reading or mathematics were reported within specific content.

Context Skills. There were no statements about skills developed in context.

Self Skills. Student statements (15) about personal skill development indicated characteristics students thought they acquired. For example, "I developed patience toward students." "I think I learned to loosen up a bit while working with the kids." "Mrs. L says to "enjoy them" and I think after my first few lessons I was able to with a little effort."

Discussion

The data in this study supports the importance of field experience as a vehicle for knowledge acquisition. Knowledge of teaching environments focused primarily on teaching behavior associated with instruction, pupils, content taught, and student perceptions of themselves as teachers. Students explored their roles and capabilities as they participated in classrooms. They observed theory to practice in classrooms in diverse teaching environments. Career exploration is an important component in field experience.

Professional skill knowledge statements show that students become aware of information related to teaching and learning in the classroom. Nearly half of the skill knowledge statements were about professional knowledge. This confirms earlier data from teacher educators that knowledge acquisition is an important outcome of beginning field experiences.

Skill knowledge about context is important. Nearly one third of the knowledge statements were context related. Students begin to examine educational environments through a professional lens that differs from views of a layman or a participant. Context is a catalyst for student responses to variable teaching and learning environments that contributes to refinement of career choices associated with grade levels, types of schools, location of schools, and pupils served. This is particularly important since some of the experiences were in urban settings.

Personal Skill Development. Students in beginning teaching experiences are introspective. They develop an awareness of themselves as potential teachers during field experiences. These preservice teachers are beginning to be teachers. Personal statements about classroom teaching support the Fuller and Bown stages of teacher development. Pre-service teachers are concerned about surviving teaching one lesson or participating with students without substantial preparation time. They also share concerns about the feelings students have toward them. One aspect of early experience may be developing affiliation or relationships with students.

Content knowledge statements show that beginning students are not concerned with teaching content. In fact, statements suggest that they are learning it along with the students in the classroom.

Professional skill development represents only 25% of student statements at this level. Skill development in these beginning educational courses is minimal. The types of teaching skills named are limited somewhat to those required in the course, for example observing, writing lesson plans, writing objectives, and teaching. There was, however, some reference to the development of personal skills such as communication and relating to students.

Field experiences are both positive and negative. While most students shared positive experiences, some students commented about teachers who are ineffective or burned out. Others mentioned what they judged as ineffective instructional approaches or curricula emphases. However, optimism is evident in their responses to poor teachers, schools, etc. They are not going to be like the negative teachers they observed.

Implications

A view of field experience from the student perspective allows the professional educator an opportunity to provide experiences that contribute more fully to the growth of the preservice teacher. Site and cooperating teacher selection should be examined to determine how and if these variables affect the quantity or quality of knowledge that is acquired.

Skill development in teacher education from a student perspective should be examined at other levels in the program. It is important to determine the roles of both the teacher educator at the university level and those of the cooperating teacher as changes in teacher education move instruction for preservice teachers to professional development schools. In addition, source (schools or universities) of skill development and the interrelationships between sources should be investigated.

Field experiences across the teacher education program should consider variations in sites across the program so that students have an opportunity to refine teaching options related to context variables. This is especially important in developing professionals who are willing and able to serve pupils with special needs and those in urban environments.

Table 1

Student Responses by Number and Percentages by Category

Category	N	%
Knowledge	1458	74
Skills	494	25
Totals	1952	99

Table 2

Student Knowledge Responses by Subcategory by Number and Percentages

Category and Subcategory	N	Subcategory %	Category %	Total %
Professional Knowledge				
General Teaching	305	45.73%	20.92%	15.63%
Discipline	155	23.24%	10.63%	7.94%
Teachers	109	16.34%	7.48%	5.58%
Students	83	12.44%	5.69%	4.25%
Evaluation	15	2.25%	1.03%	0.77%
Subtotal	667	100.00%	45.75%	34.17%
Content Knowledge				
Content	41	100.00%	2.81%	2.10%
Subtotal	41	100.00%	2.81%	2.10%
Context				
Level	148	32.10%	10.15%	7.58%
City/Urban	101	21.91%	6.93%	5.17%
General Environment	122	26.46%	8.37%	6.25%
Special Education Sites	78	16.92%	5.35%	4.00%
Open Schools/Private	12	2.60%	0.82%	0.61%
Subtotal	461	100.00%	31.62%	23.62%
Self Knowledge				
General Statements	139	48.10%	9.53%	7.12%
Varied Level Sites	87	30.10%	5.97%	4.46%
Special Education Sites	20	6.92%	1.37%	1.02%
Urban Sites	27	9.34%	1.85%	1.38%
Open Schools/Private	16	5.54%	1.10%	0.82%
Subtotal	289	100.00%	19.82%	14.81%
Totals	1458	100.00%	100.00%	74.69%

Table 3

Student Skill Responses by Subcategory by Number and Percentages

Category and Subcategory	N	Subcategory %	Category %	Total %
Professional Skills				
Classroom Instruction	185	40.13%	37.45%	9.48%
Instructional Planning	106	22.99%	21.46%	5.43%
Communication	58	12.58%	11.74%	2.97%
Observation	56	12.15%	11.34%	2.87%
Use of Media	34	7.38%	6.88%	1.74%
Classroom Discipline	22	4.77%	4.45%	1.13%
Subtotal	461	100.00%	93.32%	23.62%
Content Skills				
Teaching in Content Areas	18	100.00%	3.64%	0.92%
Subtotal	18	100.00%	3.64%	0.92%
Context Skills				
Context Skills	0	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Subtotal	0	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Self Skills				
Personal Skills	15	100.00%	3.04%	0.77%
Subtotal	15	100.00%	3.04%	0.77%
Totals	494	100.00%	100.00%	25.31%

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